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Study Highlights:

- Sexual activity is safe for most heart disease and stroke patients.
- Women with cardiovascular disease should be counseled on the safety and advisability of contraceptive methods and pregnancy based on their patient profile.
- Medications to treat erectile dysfunction aren't safe for all men with cardiovascular disease.

American Heart Association Scientific Statement:

Sexual activity is safe for most heart, stroke patients

DALLAS, Jan. 19, 2012 — If you have stable cardiovascular disease, it is more than likely that you can safely engage in sexual activity, according to an American Heart Association scientific statement.

The statement, published online in *Circulation: Journal of the American Heart Association*, contains recommendations by experts from various fields, including heart disease, exercise physiology and sexual counseling.

“Sexual activity is a major quality of life issue for men and women with cardiovascular disease and their partners,” said Glenn N. Levine, M.D., lead author of the statement and a professor of medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas. “Unfortunately, discussions about sexual activity rarely take place in the clinical context.”

The recommendations include:

- After a diagnosis of cardiovascular disease, it is reasonable for patients to be evaluated by their physician or healthcare provider before resuming sexual activity.
- Cardiac rehabilitation and regular physical activity can reduce the risk of cardiovascular complications related to sexual activity in people who have had heart failure or a heart attack.
- Women with cardiovascular disease should be counseled on the safety and advisability of contraceptive methods and pregnancy based on their patient profile.
- Patients with severe heart disease who have symptoms with minimal activity or while at rest should not be sexually active until their cardiovascular disease symptoms are stabilized with appropriate treatment.
- Patients should be assessed to see if their sexual dysfunction is related to underlying vascular or cardiac disease, anxiety, depression or other factors.

- Drugs that can improve cardiovascular symptoms or survival should not be withheld due to concerns that such drugs may impact sexual function.
- Drugs to treat erectile dysfunction are generally safe for men who have stable cardiovascular disease. These drugs should not be used in patients receiving nitrate therapy for chest pains due to coronary artery disease (blockages in the arteries that supply the heart with blood), and nitrates should not be administered to patients within 24-48 hours of using an erectile dysfunction drug (depending on the drug used).
- It is reasonable for post-menopausal women with cardiovascular disease to use estrogen that's topically or vaginally inserted for the treatment of painful intercourse.

Decreased sexual activity and function — common in men and women with cardiovascular diseases — is often related to anxiety and depression.

The absolute rate of cardiovascular events during sexual activity, such as heart attacks or chest pain caused by heart disease, is miniscule because sexual activity is usually for a short time.

“Some patients will postpone sexual activity when it is actually relatively safe for them to engage in it,” said Levine, who is also director of the Cardiac Care Unit at the Michael E. DeBakey Medical Center in Houston. “On the other hand, there are some patients for whom it may be reasonable to defer sexual activity until they’re assessed and stabilized.”

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